

ANTHONY STANONIS

“Take Him East Where Life Began”

The Role of Virginia in Shaping the Early Writings of Allen Tate

*When it is all over and the blood
Runs out, do not bury this man
By the far river (where never stood
His fathers) flowing to the West,
But take him East where life began.*

“Emblems” (1931)

These elegant thoughts poured from the heart of Allen Tate. Raised in Kentucky yet never in one place for long, Tate harbored strong sentiments of dislocation. The longing for a home regularly appeared in his writings. Tate even told the tale, one scholars continue to debate, of how his mother deceived him about the location of his birthplace. He was born on 19 November 1899 in Winchester, Kentucky. Eleanor Varnell Tate, however, supposedly told her boy that he had entered the world in Virginia. She boasted of his ancestral roots, a heritage stretching into what she depicted as the civilized, aristocratic gentry transplanted from Europe with the first ships to Jamestown. The rolling hills of Kentucky offered only transitory residence. Consequently, the young poet struggled with the meaning of place in his life. Throughout Tate’s early career, Virginia remained his home at heart if not in the physical world.¹

Tate’s early literary life, particularly the period from 1925 to 1938, centered on his struggle with a mythic Virginia of noble cavaliers. For a young

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southerner immersed in his heritage, ties to place determined identity. Tate had invested Virginia with qualities that informed his perception of other sections of the South and the nation—Kentucky and all other states represented an inferior way of life. His works from this period emphasize the contrasts. But later, coming to accept his birth in Kentucky, Tate began to re-examine Virginia and the assumed superiority of the state his mother had so highly praised. This regional and personal tension in Tate's early career offers fresh insight into one of the South's most prominent men of letters. A comparison of Tate's depiction of Virginia with his views of other states provides insight into his personal struggle with a mythic Virginia.²

Tate's youth set the stage for his fixation with the Old Dominion. John Orley Tate, Allen's father, married Nellie Varnell in the 1880s. During his youth, John Tate lived off an inheritance left by his grandfather. As he matured, he repeatedly squandered business opportunities. He and his newly formed family, which eventually included three sons, crisscrossed the countryside year after year as John Tate sought financial success. Known to gamble and to pursue women, the patriarch of the Tate family provided little security for his children. The Tate children similarly suffered from instability in their mother. Allen, almost ten years younger than his siblings, frequently joined his mother as she continuously journeyed to resorts and health spas while his brothers stayed with relatives. Nellie Tate clung to Allen, a sickly child and the baby of the family. Rather than preserve the extensive landholdings inherited from her father as a nest egg for her boys, Allen's mother sold thousands of acres to fund her itinerant lifestyle until little remained. To make matters worse, Nellie Tate, ignoring her own birth in Illinois as well as her husband's family tree that stretched back to Virginia, criticized her roving husband for being an Illinois-born Yankee. Nellie, while downplaying her husband's heritage, emphasized her own family's deep Virginia roots. She falsely claimed a Virginia birth for herself on the Varnell estate Pleasant Hill and included George Washington and Robert E. Lee in her family tree. Tate's mother stressed her family's aristocratic status as plantation owners, a legacy that stretched back to the founding of the nation. Eleanor Custis Parke Varnell, to use her full maiden name, did possess a prestigious lineage including a father who participated in Pickett's Charge. But Nellie Tate regaled her son about his heritage to the point of exaggeration.

Sometimes she even invented stories about her family's accomplishments. Allen Tate's forefathers seemed giants who cast a long shadow over him. Yet, given the degree of family tension, constant movement, and financial turmoil, young Tate found solace and stability in the grandeur of Virginia about which his mother so often boasted.³

A bookish child who struggled with math and science, Tate in 1918 earned admittance to Vanderbilt University, where he soon encountered a cadre of intellectuals who stirred the young man's curiosity about the literary arts and his southern heritage. Tate became intellectually rebellious. Inspired by H. L. Mencken's critiques of the region's culture, Tate sought to create quality literature, particularly poetry, in the South. He befriended John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and others, joining them in reciting freshly penned poetry at regularly held, informal gatherings. The poets soon started the much-acclaimed journal *The Fugitive*. Tate's poems, written in a modernist style influenced heavily by T. S. Eliot, appeared increasingly in print not only in the Nashville-based publication but also in New Orleans's famed literary journal, *The Double Dealer*. Receiving national attention, Tate eagerly wanted to join the literati of New York City. Upon graduation, however, he spent a year teaching at a high school in Lumberport, West Virginia. The small, bustling coal town re-energized his interest in southern culture. His friendship with Robert Penn Warren, whom Tate had known at Vanderbilt, also inadvertently reaffirmed Tate's commitment to the South. Tate visited his friend in 1924 while Warren recuperated in his hometown of Guthrie, Kentucky, after attempting suicide. In Guthrie, Tate met his future wife, the novelist Caroline Gordon, who repeatedly dealt with southern themes in her work. Tate's subsequent move to New York City in the mid-1920s only accentuated his sense of southernness. Soon, Tate's concern with being from the South spilled into his writings. By the late 1920s, he prepared to rejoin his circle of comrades in Tennessee to form the Vanderbilt Agrarians, a loose group of intellectuals that not only defended the South from criticism but also urged the preservation of the region's agricultural ways.⁴

Between 1925 and 1938, Tate's understanding of Virginia dominated his writings and revealed the evolution of his thought. In an October 1925 article on southern culture for *The Nation*, Tate lamented how "societies in the

United States so distinguished for the graces of living as the two flourishing simultaneously in Charleston and in the counties of Virginia between Charlottesville and Washington from about 1800 to 1850" failed to see "their perfections." Tate gave credit on occasion to both Charleston and New Orleans as cultural centers, but Virginia received his particular praise. The South, properly understood in his work, was synonymous with the Old Dominion, at least when he spoke positively about the region. Negative comments about the South signaled a change in Tate's reference to a region that included the former Confederacy and, occasionally, even the Border States but excluded Virginia. The Deep South, Border States, and North were all clearly inferior to Virginia. His frequent references to the antebellum culture of the South reflected his vision of a chivalrous, stratified society in Virginia. For Tate, the Old Dominion rested at the pinnacle of southern, not to mention American, society. The state served as a measuring stick by which to judge other members of the Union. In Tate's Virginia, British colonizers transplanted a stable, traditional, and aristocratic society based on the feudal system. Every citizen occupied a position in a firm, hierarchical social structure based on land ownership.⁵

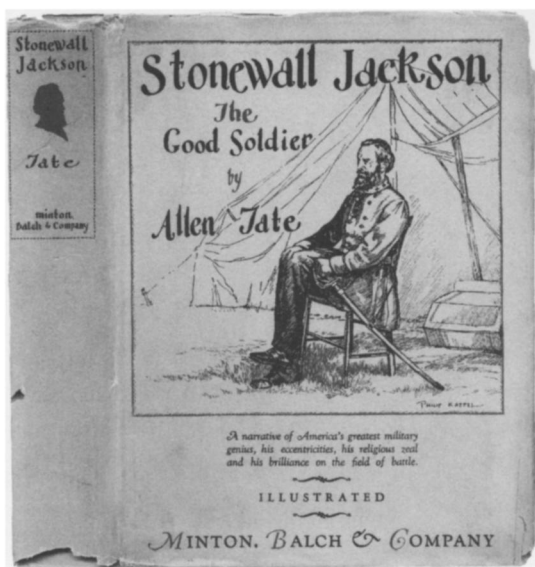
In "Ode to the Confederate Dead," Tate expressed his admiration for Virginia culture as well as his distance from it. Written in 1926 and frequently revised in the 1930s, this poem was one of the Kentuckian's finest works. A deep sense of loss pervades it. Donald Davidson, in a February 1927 letter to Tate written after reviewing an early draft of the poem, claimed that "Ode" did not mourn "for the Confederate dead, but for your own dead emotion, or mine (*you* think)." The personal element within the text revealed Tate's sense of temporal and spatial separation from his eminent Virginian forefathers.⁶

Within "Ode," Tate revealed modern man's inability to grasp the glory of the Old South. The poem makes clear that modern man is incapable of conceptualizing the mythic actions of Confederate soldiers. The abstraction of time out of the natural cycle creates a temporal gap that separates the 1920s from the 1860s. Modern man, according to Tate, locates himself outside nature. The cemetery represents an agrarian way of life; while the falling leaves, symbolic of the buried Confederates who in their last living moment charged into the face of death, participate in a seasonal, yet also spiritual,

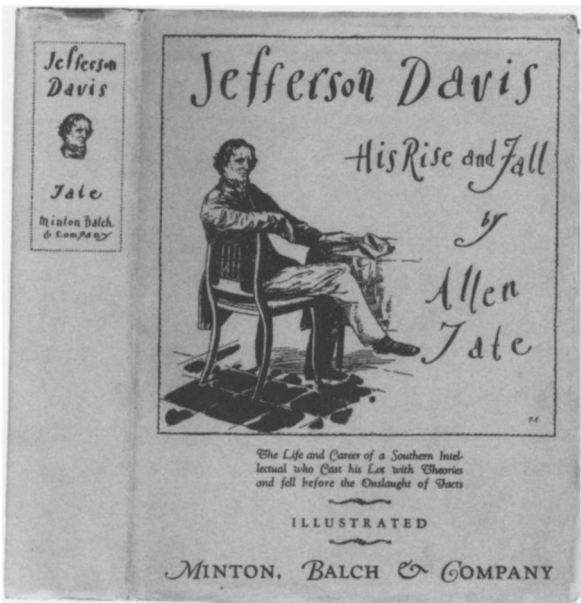
cycle of life and death. As a result, death brings only the “rumour of mortality.” The leaves, like the decayed bodies of former soldiers, “are not / Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.” They remain alive within the seasonal cycle. For Tate, however, modern man cannot grasp the wholeness of events. The observer of the cemetery lingers “by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall,” a symbol of a temporal divide. An inhabitant of the modern world is unable to embrace the mythic warriors. He rationalizes experience and therefore fails to comprehend the unseen mythic cycle of death and rebirth that grants continued importance to their brave actions. Such a person remains blind to the wholeness of experience attained through a combination of intellect and emotion as well as the natural and supernatural. Whereas “Night is the beginning and the end / And in between the ends of distraction / Waits mute speculation,” Tate’s modern man seeks a completely rational explanation for life, his intellect subjugating emotion and spirituality.⁷

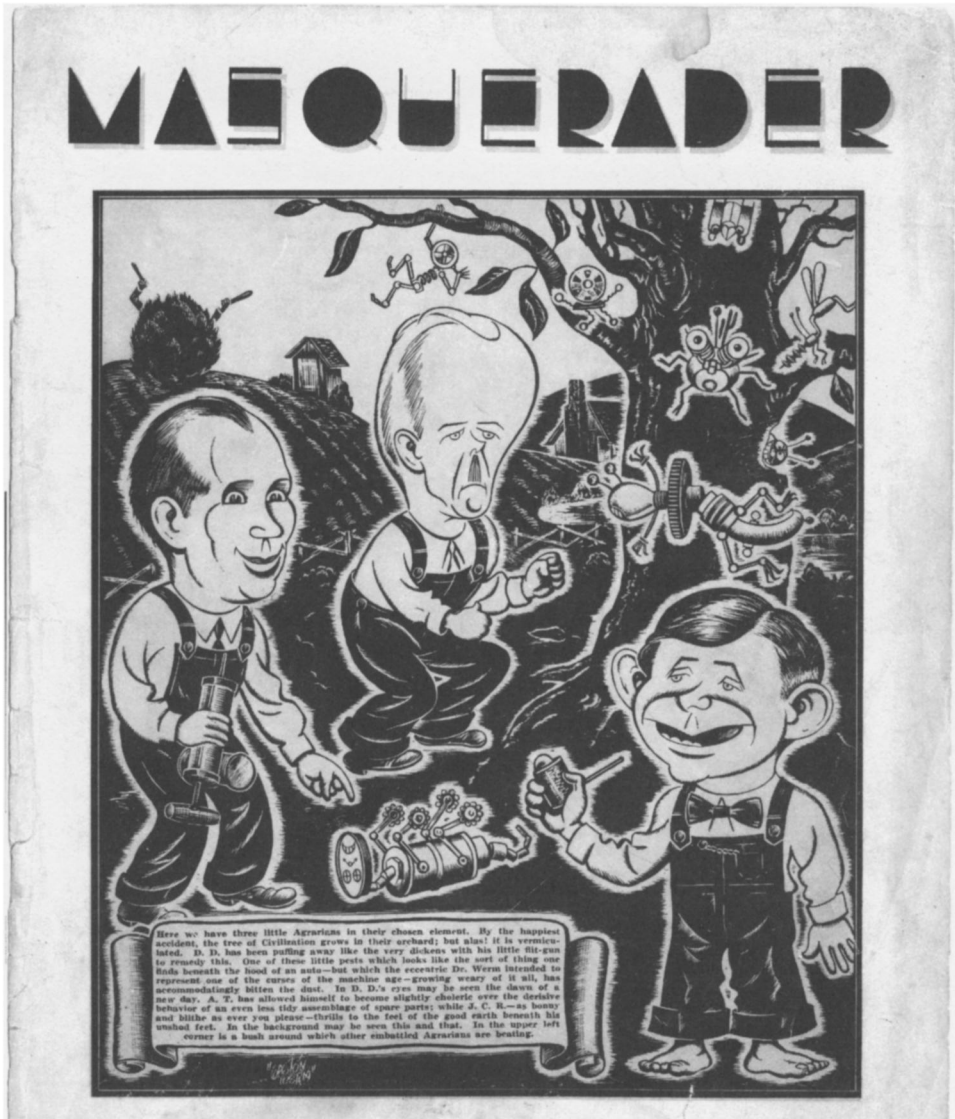
The spatial division, also signified by the gate, reveals the importance of Virginia to the poem and to its author. By not entering the cemetery, the observer fails to participate in a traditional, agrarian lifestyle in rhythm with the cyclical occurrence of life and death. This separation was laden with importance for Tate, who lived outside Virginia. Tate came of age as an exile from the sacred burial grounds in which his ancestors rested. The Appalachians, like the stone wall, barred access to his home. The closed gate represents a childhood and young adulthood isolated from the molding power of Tate’s glorified forefathers. Moreover, Tate overtly refers to Virginia within the text. Other than Shiloh, the battles mentioned in the text—Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run—all occurred in the Virginia theater. The reference to “Stonewall, Stonewall” calls attention to Gen. Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson of Virginia, the only commander referred to in the poem. Tate’s personal longing and admiration for the Old Dominion remain clear throughout “Ode.”⁸

In 1928, Tate released the first of two biographical works on Confederate leaders. Tate’s *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* examines the life of the famed military commander from his birth in western Virginia until his mortal wounding on the battlefield at Chancellorsville. Tate did not plan simply to chronicle events. Instead, he approached the biography as if creating a



Allen Tate’s longing for the South of a bygone era led to his biographies of two Confederate leaders: *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928) and *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929). (All: Vanderbilt University Special Collections and Archives)





Above: Allen Tate befriended John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson at Vanderbilt University, where the young poets started the acclaimed journal, *The Fugitive*. When Tate returned to Vanderbilt from New York in the late 1920s, he joined the Agrarians, a loose circle of intellectuals keen to defend southern culture. The Vanderbilt student magazine, *Masquerader*, caricatured Donald, Tate, and Ransom (left to right) as rural foes of mechanized bugs. (Vanderbilt University Special Collections and Archives)

novel. Corresponding with Donald Davidson in May 1927, Tate declared, "If I were intending to write a literal, technical account of Jackson's career, I wouldn't write it!" Tate intended "to issue a little doctrine in the book, but I don't want it to be obvious enough for the reader to be able to put his finger on it." The young biographer camouflaged his personal sentiments in the guise of Jackson's worldview. As literary scholar Michael Kreyling has pointed out, the biography was "lean on historical analysis and rich with authorial technique." Tate's faith in his Virginia heritage permitted a personal association with the military commander. This intimate joining resulted in a biography that reveals more about Tate than the Confederate corps commander it chronicles.⁹

For Tate, Jackson embodied the characteristics engendered by a birth and childhood on Virginia soil. The Confederate general clearly appears in the biography as a unified man combining thought with emotive action. He adroitly maneuvered his troops around superior enemy forces, frequently achieving victories in the face of overwhelming odds. In this, his firm convictions aided him. By swift violent action and strength of will, Jackson conquered his foes. He was the rock of faith, trusting in God to bring victory to a righteous cause.

Tate reveals his admiration of the stable aristocracy present in Virginia within his biography of the famed Confederate commander. In words relevant to his view of his own family, Tate begins his study by declaring that Jackson's Virginia "ancestors were noble men. How good it would be to be like them. . . ." From this opening, Tate depicts the agrarian, aristocratic society he admired. Antebellum Virginia existed in a time when the citizenry still cherished and honored "English ideas." Chivalry and noblesse oblige regulated the behavior of gentlemen planters, and small farmers deferred to their betters. Because of transplanted European values, the state described by Tate possessed a "feudal order" of gentry, poor whites, and slaves. Position within the social hierarchy depended upon property ownership. By possessing property, an individual placed himself in the natural cycle of time. An agrarian was therefore endowed with a sense of the natural and supernatural; this was a vision Tate had articulated earlier in "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Land molded the character of men. Consequently, "the man as he appeared in public was the man: his public appearance was his moral life."

Ownership of self-sufficient homesteads served as “fixed property.” Land thus anchored the social hierarchy as well as human personality. The northern emphasis on cash, in Tate’s view, allowed individuals of questionable character to accrue wealth through unscrupulous means. Dressed in finery and owning large estates, these capitalists presented a false nobility. Such was not the case in Virginia, where property, according to Tate, rested in the firm hands of the aristocracy. Without “negotiable wealth,” Virginians sustained their society despite the pressures of capitalism.¹⁰

According to Tate, the importance of property shaped the political and religious opinions that led Virginia to secede. On the question of slavery he believed that “orthodox” Virginians had stood firm in their belief that the peculiar institution should eventually come to extinction. Yet, with their independence rooted in land ownership, Virginia planters and yeomen dedicated themselves to the preservation of the agrarian lifestyle threatened by Yankee aggression. Property fostered religious devotion to the cause. As farmers dependent on nature, Virginians had always trusted in God to sustain their way of life. In 1861, they placed the success of their war effort in the hands of God. Tate showed how, like Jackson, Virginians’ faith in Providence repeatedly allowed them to defeat enemy forces superior in number. Their military strategy placed reason in the service of religious faith. When intellect violated faith, as when Jackson engaged and lost to federal troops at Kernstown on the Sabbath, the “unrighteous act” required justification and atonement. For Virginians, at least, religion buoyed the war effort. Faith permitted them to vanquish the enemy in the east while federal forces ran roughshod across other areas of the Confederacy.¹¹

Tate argued that the “frontier” areas west and southwest of Virginia failed to evolve the social stability found in the Old Dominion. A firm social hierarchy “had not got much headway in the western States.” Here Tate included Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Mississippi in his analysis. In *Stone-wall Jackson*, Tate denounced Lincoln, a Kentuckian by birth, as a typical westerner. His startling statement on this point illuminates much about Tate’s view of states formed beyond the Atlantic seaboard. Addressing Lincoln’s firm commitment to the Union, Tate explained that this was natural for a westerner. In sharp language, Tate held that “the Western States were parasitical communities, looking East economically and spiritually.” Then,

he qualified his declaration; westerners “could not believe in the right of secession; they could have no desire to cut themselves off from the section they depended on—New England.” Networks of commerce and industry based upon the concept of wage labor bound together those states north of the Ohio River. For Tate, such a labor system simply replaced chattel slavery with “a better slave; he [who] would have the illusion of freedom.” Although Tate clarified his use of “western” when discussing Lincoln, ambiguity remains. Tate’s vague use of “western” suggests his belief in the inferiority of all states formed on the frontier.¹²

In Tate’s view, the frontier produced an inferior people. Tate argued that the Jackson family, for example, declined by moving to Virginia’s frontier, although their close connections to the Tidewater region offered redemption from the ills of western life. Jackson’s mother, Julia Beckwith Neale, “came of a respectable family of the tidewater.” Yet, life on the frontier threatened to defile her family. Julia Neale, Tate explained, possessed no “pioneering in her blood. She was sensitive, shy, not very robust.” Gentility suffered from the hardship of frontier life. Jackson, as a result, harbored a desire to restore the vitality of his family, suggesting Tate’s vision of his own distance from his supposed Virginia birthplace. Although the Jacksons residing on the western fringe of Virginia were a “respectable people,” the young soldier’s desire to distinguish himself stemmed from “the discrepancy between his inherited family pride and the poverty that had humbled his branch of the Jackson family.” The idea of decline therefore grew into a driving force for Jackson, and for Tate. Each took responsibility for restoring the stature of his family.¹³

Upon completion of *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier*, Tate immediately plunged into another biographical project. He wrote the work, eventually published in 1929 as *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall*, while in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Tate focused solely upon Davis’s years as president of the Confederacy. In the book, this dramatic four-year period serves as a tragic narrative of the weaknesses of the southern nation as epitomized by the character of its political leader. As with his biography of Jackson, Tate explained in a February 1928 letter to Donald Davidson that he intended “a sort of psychological history.” Tate’s analysis is again shaped significantly by his personal sentiments. Both author and subject shared a Kentucky back-

ground. As a result, the biography of Davis is Tate's examination of himself as much as it is a study of the politician. Tate had resided in Kentucky for most of his childhood, adopting some of the traits common to the state. His attachment to his Virginia heritage, however, allowed Tate to attack Davis while insulating himself from judgment.¹⁴

In Tate's opinion, intellectual devotion to principles overrode emotion on the frontier. Born in Kentucky, Davis acquired southwestern lands, primarily in Mississippi. The future Confederate president thus was steeped in a brand of southernism different from the values found in the stable society of Virginia. Tate considered Davis a typical non-Virginia southerner. For the young Agrarian, the "process of expansion in one family is the story of the rise of the Lower South." Davis and his ilk suffered from an inability to act. Though he was intellectually capable, Davis's desire to think through events resulted in wasted opportunities. The "morbidly sensitive and emotionally undisciplined" Davis, Tate wrote, possessed a "boundless intellectual pride." Yet, despite his ability to analyze events or develop plans, Davis "could not feel his way into the future, nor foretell the results of his own decisions." In short, Davis was a modern man.¹⁵

According to Tate, the pursuit of financial opportunity by settlers like Davis shaped the society of the frontier South. The vast, virgin territories of the region lacked the strong tradition that grounded Virginia culture. Cotton reigned, and the profits gained by its sale converted the frontier South into a land of financial opportunity. As southerners extracted money from the soil, land became a means not an end. Tate therefore believed that southerners from this area thought mechanically, like northerners, as they methodically attempted to boost production and profits. A resident of the older, established coastal areas "unless possessed of great personal distinction—and this in Virginia often meant merely education—was likely to remain all his life in the class in which he had been born." Inhabitants in the cotton country, on the other hand, easily worked up or slid down the social ladder as the fertile lands in states such as Mississippi and Alabama offered freedom of movement and the opportunity for financial success. Here, in words Tate could have easily applied to the industrial North, "everybody was 'on the make.'" The nobility Tate identified in the feudal-like aristocracy of Virginia failed to take root in the frontier South. He labeled the region's residents

“nouveaux riches.” Like all persons who quickly acquire wealth and position, southerners in the cotton-producing lands adopted the appearance of the “haute noblesse.” Despite the facade of stability, the society of the frontier South remained in flux.¹⁶

Land and slaves, as in the Old Dominion, instilled residents of the frontier South with responsibility that tempered the pursuit of wealth through cotton. This “definite physical legacy,” to use Tate’s phrase, increasingly hindered the rabid pursuit of the riches and prestige as the social structure settled. The young biographer held that this was especially true in the decade before the Civil War when the most fertile lands increasingly came under the control of a small number of planters. Only by checks upon ambition could an agricultural society develop the social stability and “close ties among all classes which distinguish a civilization from a mere social machine,” marching, in Tate’s words, gradually “towards an empire, agricultural, slave-owning, aristocratic.” Nevertheless, the ten years preceding the bombardment of Fort Sumter was not enough time for the stable agrarian society Tate admired in Virginia to emerge in the states along the cotton frontier.¹⁷ This region merely mimicked Virginia culture, according to Tate. As a child looks up to his parents, so the immature cotton-producing states “naturally looked to the older communities—Virginia, Charleston, New Orleans—for [their] standards of manners and taste.” With waves of migrants settling in the frontier South, a contradiction arose within the developing region. Tate declared that this area of the South consisted of a “society democratic in tone and professing democratic ideals yet resting upon a highly aristocratic social and economic system.” Although he believed a hierarchy similar to the one established in the Old Dominion would have emerged in time, democratic sentiments continued to hinder the frontier South as presented by Tate.

Tate believed that the circumstances surrounding the development of the frontier South, like its social structure, created a seriously flawed religion. Its settlement led to the emergence of regional nationalism flavored with religious fervor. Whereas Kentucky maintained, according to Tate, “the feeling of pioneer nationalism,” which prevented the state from joining the Confederacy, the frontier South adopted a cotton-based nationalism. However, it was still too young to develop a religion appropriate for an agrarian society. Tate argued that Virginia and the Carolinas, for instance, inherited a reli-

gious tradition directly from Europe. Migrating southerners who transported these beliefs westward consequently boasted that “they were the forlorn hope, of conservative Fundamentalist Christianity and of civilization, based on agrarian, class rule, in the European sense. Europe was already being Americanized—which means Northernized, industrialized—and the South by 1850 was more European than Europe.” Davis exemplified the shortcomings his biographer associated with the region. The leader of the seceded states possessed a “deep and genuine religious feeling” that “led him to put the Confederacy in the hands of God”—a devotion shared by most of the citizens of the Confederate States. For Tate, however, the cotton economy had altered the European religious tradition and separated Virginia from the rest of the southern states. The Deep South cradled a “trinity” formed by cotton, slaves, and God. The profiteering associated with the cotton frontier altered the understanding of religion in an agrarian civilization. The social flux Tate associated with the booming cotton market and the availability of land fostered democratic sentiments that tainted the religion cherished by inhabitants of the frontier South by weakening the feudal order of the society. According to Tate, the sectional struggle involved “class rule and religion *versus* democracy and science.” However, southerners such as Davis persisted in the belief that Christianity and science could work in unison for the improvement of mankind. The Confederate leader as described by Tate never realized that agrarianism required “a profoundly anti-scientific society.” An agrarian society demanded social stability, which was antithetical to scientific questioning and the continuous change it encouraged.¹⁸

Tate proposed that scientific thinking—abstractions in thought—prevented the formation of war measures required for victory. Southerners such as Davis placed trust in constitutional principles—abstractions that recognized mankind’s inalienable rights. From Tate’s viewpoint, the constitutional principles hindered aggressive action against what remained of the United States. Davis had “a disturbing and alien memory to look back to; a kind of Sodom, if you will, that he came to hate, but to which he was still drawn, the vision of which was to turn him into a pillar of salt!” With his head in the clouds, Davis allowed the Confederacy to deteriorate. Moreover, by defending the principles inscribed in the Constitution, the frontier South upheld what Tate criticized as the flawed founding document of the United

States—itself a product of abstract thought. The Republicans and the North, by this line of reasoning, were the usurping rebels. Furthermore, the defensive strategy of maintaining the borders of the entire Confederacy rather than concentrating forces against enemy armies “was theoretically in harmony with the abstract principles that the Confederacy stood for.” The country, in other words, was defined by artificial boundaries drawn on a map, not by an organic sense of community. Without the living faith Tate linked to Jackson and his fellow Virginians, the new nation led by Davis was doomed.¹⁹

Tate stood firm in his high regard for Virginia throughout his biographies. In his eyes, the Old Dominion remained the “mother of States and Statesmen.” Unlike settlers farther south and west, Tate shared antebellum Virginians’ disgust with the turmoil caused by cotton culture. Neither the young author nor the Virginians he so admired harbored “sympathy with the Lower South dream of a great empire.” In their view, territorial expansion and gross yearnings for financial gain bred social instability. The “upstarts” of the frontier South were a long way from the refined society of Virginia.²⁰

For Tate, the devastation of the Civil War occurred not as a result of a failure within the Old Dominion but because of the rash actions taken by citizens of other southern states. Once the people of the Lower South threw down the gauntlet, Tate believed that Virginians had little choice but to side with their wayward kinsmen—a decision that visited terrible consequences upon their state. Virginia was at war, forcing the last feudal society in the world to surrender what Tate considered its wholesome agrarian life for one of wage labor and industrialization. Tate summarized his opinion in *Stonewall Jackson*: “Tidewater Virginia after two hundred fifty years of European culture was a desolate wilderness.” Nevertheless, by holding Virginia apart from the rest of the Confederacy, Tate maintained hope for the restitution of an agrarian culture throughout the South. The Old Dominion fell mortally wounded at Appomattox, but faith in Virginia’s feudal culture suggested to Tate the feasibility of a resurrection. Restoring agrarian culture based on the Virginia model promised salvation for humanity from the fragmentation of modern society by restoring property and defining each individual’s place within the social structure. The return of agrarian society would in turn restore the powerful religious faith of antebellum Virginia, a faith that had

allowed Tate's Virginians to hold off Federal armies during the war while other southern states crumbled.²¹

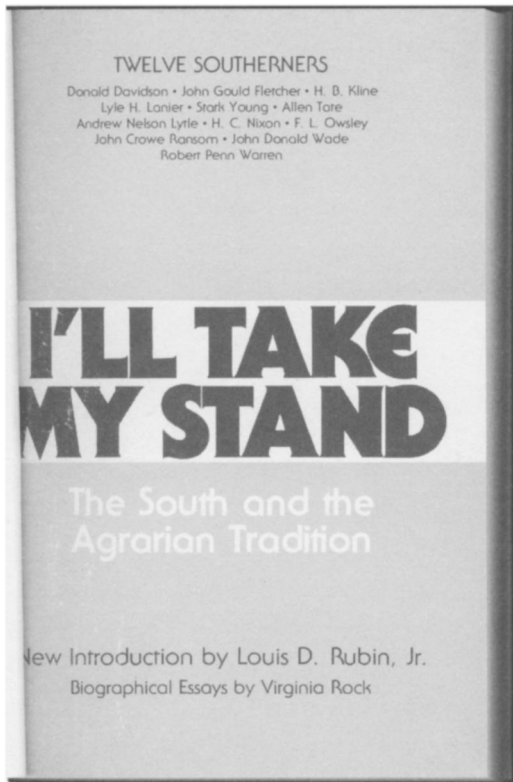
By the 1930s, Tate struggled to reconcile facts with the fables he harbored about Virginia. His stay in Europe in the late 1920s on a Guggenheim Foundation grant had exposed him to predominantly Catholic societies. A subsequent trip to Europe, this time funded by a Guggenheim Foundation grant awarded in the early 1930s to his wife Caroline Gordon, furthered his interest in Catholicism's rigid doctrine and its role in preserving the seemingly timeless, agrarian communities he encountered in France and other countries. Tate's upbringing had been a mixture of Episcopalian and Presbyterian beliefs, the denominations of his father and mother, respectively. The traditions of Catholicism, however, so appealed to Tate that he eventually converted in 1950. That his maternal grandfather and his colonial ancestors who arrived in Maryland in the late 1600s were also Catholic likely fueled his interest in the religion. Yet, he particularly admired Catholicism for maintaining a separation between the natural and the supernatural. Furthering his drift toward Catholicism, Tate, while preparing the biography on Jefferson Davis, discovered what he deemed flaws of Protestantism. Writing to Donald Davidson in 1929, Tate argued that Protestantism was "virtually naturalism." Protestant congregations lacked dogma, thus permitting religion to become "private and irresponsible." His changing attitude toward religion altered his view of Virginia, especially in light of his concern with identity.²²

Tate struggled through 1930 with his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, the volume of essays written by the socially conservative southern intellectuals eventually known as the Vanderbilt Agrarians. For some time Tate and his compatriots in Tennessee, such as Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom, had prepared for a possible campaign to encourage the restoration of the South's agricultural base, especially among the region's small farmers. The Vanderbilt Agrarians, though sometimes limited by contradictory views, typically saw the region's agriculture in Jeffersonian terms. Tillers of the soil possessed the virtues of hard work and sustained a stable social structure. In line with this belief, Tate had even established a farm near Nashville he named Benfolly. Although the renaissance in southern farming failed to emerge as a social or political movement, the disappointed Agrarians, includ-



Above: In *Washington's Last Birthday, 1798* Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (1863–1930) captures some of the genteel cavalier culture of an imagined Old Virginia. About the time Ferris was creating his gauzy paintings of a mythic past, Allen Tate was crafting literary works of the same ilk. In contrast to his depictions of refined, cultured Virginians, Tate described those from the frontier South as coarse and scheming. Such characterizations echo some of the work of nineteenth-century author Joseph Glover Baldwin (1815–1864). The illustration at left is from his *Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1854) and depicts the unsavory Simon Suggs, a cunning land speculator. (Both: *Virginia Historical Society*)

In 1930 a group of intellectuals centered at Vanderbilt University in Nashville published a landmark work of southern letters. *I'll Take My Stand* combined the talents of a diverse group of writers who collectively became known as the Agrarians. The appellation derived from the group's contention that the South's identity was slipping away in the face of urbanization and modernity. They called for the region to reclaim its agrarian heritage and thus its distinctiveness. Contributing an essay to *I'll Take My Stand*, Allen Tate was a leading light in the Agrarian movement. He was joined by (from top to bottom) poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989); poet and essayist Donald Davidson (1893–1968); and poet and critic John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974). (Below: *Virginia Historical Society*; Right: *Vanderbilt University Special Collections and Archives*)



ing Tate, continued to participate in the effort through debates and articles well into the 1930s.²³

Oddly, however, Tate used the publication of the Vanderbilt Agrarians' tome of essays to begin a serious reconsideration of his Virginia heritage. His mother's death likely stirred Tate's interest in exploring his perception of the culture she so often described to her son. In "Remarks on the Southern Religion," Tate fired his first volley against Virginia. The colony established at Jamestown possessed in Protestantism "the disintegration of the European religion" known as Catholicism. Protestantism advanced trade, profit, and the exploitation of nature. Catholicism in contrast fostered a stable society. Unlike conditions in New England that unleashed the profit motive in Protestantism, the agrarian culture that Tate envisioned in the southern colonies resulted in "atavism." A feudal society reminiscent of Europe arose. The Jamestown settlement thereby forged a stable society within Protestantism. Nevertheless, Tate noted that the religious-based seeds of the South's destruction only remained dormant until the advent of cotton released the acquisitive drive associated with economic exploitation, a point he apparently realized during his work on Davis.²⁴

His growing acceptance of his Kentucky upbringing and tumultuous childhood continued the process of demythologizing. In the early 1930s, Tate attempted a family history. He explained to John Peale Bishop that he still thought in terms of the "fundamental contrast . . . between the Va. tide-water idea—stability, land, the establishment—and the pioneer, who frequently of course took on the Va. idea, even in Tenn., but who usually had some energy left over, which has made modern America." Yet, his efforts to capture his heritage in words failed. The aptly titled genealogical work, which began as *Ancestors in Exile* and then became *The Legacy*, failed to develop. Tate also proved unable to capture the life of Virginian Robert E. Lee with paper and ink in a third Confederate leader study. In words equally relevant to his genealogical study, Tate explained his inability to proceed with the book on Lee. The frustrated writer informed Andrew Lytle: "It is as if I had married a beautiful girl, perfect in figure, pure in all those physical attributes that seem to clothe purity of character, and then had found when she had undressed that the hidden places were corrupt and diseased." Tate struggled with the contradiction between historical evidence and the knowl-

edge that his mother had exaggerated the Virginia virtues he supposedly shared with his ancestors and the revered Confederate general. Tate began reconstructing his image of the Old Dominion, and in it, Virginia appeared increasingly flawed.²⁵

To explore his heritage, Tate experimented with a genre during the mid-1930s. Writing history proved impossible for Tate, who explained to John Peale Bishop that he “could not handle the material in that form at all, without faking either the significance or the material.” Consequently, Tate plunged into his first and only novel, *The Fathers*. His deep personal investment in the plot emerged as he carefully modeled the characters after members of his own family, a new approach that permitted Tate to engage his Virginia ancestors critically. He freed himself from the limitations of fact to meet the mythic Virginia so often described to him by his mother on its own ground, the land of fiction.²⁶

Tate’s novel related the downfall of the Buchan family of Virginia. The fictional family recalled Tate’s ancestors on the Bogan side of his mother’s family, providing the novelist with an immediate cast of characters as well as a means of addressing the glorified stories so often heard about his forebears during his youth. As members of the planter class, the Buchans epitomize the best qualities of Virginians. Major Buchan, a prominent aristocrat, is the recently widowed patriarch of the family. George Posey, a Catholic Marylander who married into the Buchan clan, stands in sharp contrast to his elderly father-in-law. Tate based the Posey clan on the Varnell side of his mother’s family. George Posey is a modern man, unable to accept the traditional society he nevertheless admires. Set in the months before Virginia’s plunge into the abyss of civil war, the novel recounts the actions of the tradition-bound Unionist Buchan and gun-running Confederate Posey. Buchan represents a Virginia society bound by a rigid code of honor and hesitant to leap into a fight that threatens to bring chaos to the stable, seemingly unchanging culture entrenched in the Old Dominion. Posey symbolizes the profit-driven southerners found outside Virginia who impetuously strove for independence despite the possible social and economic costs. As war descends upon them, the family of divided loyalties tears apart. Tate dissects the Virginia society he so glorified through the eyes of Lacy Buchan, the youngest child of the Buchan family who relates the story while visiting Posey’s grave

fifty years after the events. Lacy admires Buchan and Posey. He recognizes that both individuals, along with what they represent, are his fathers. Tate uses Lacy as a vehicle for testing his family history; this was a pattern repeated from the Jackson and Davis biographies. Years later, Tate even admitted that Lacy was a fictional projection of himself. The scenes, which include a jousting match, recalled and organized the stories Tate's mother had so often related to her son. By maneuvering through the plot, both Lacy and Tate reconcile themselves to the limitations of their respective societies.²⁷

Lacy Buchan frequently voices sentiments applicable to Tate as the author struggled to reconcile himself with his Virginia ancestors. At one point, Lacy exclaims, "[I]t was my distinct impression until manhood and education effaced it, that God was a Virginian who had created the world in his own image." Lacy, like Tate, awakens to the fiction of the over-glorified Virginia presented to him throughout his youth. Lacy slowly recognizes the shallowness of Virginians, who seem unable to grasp the cruel reality of war. At one point, he overhears George Posey complain that natives of the state suffered from a fixation with marriage, death, and the honor of Virginia. Lacy, instead of feeling anger at this criticism of his culture, realizes that he shares George's view. Though he still respects the honor of his home state, Lacy explains how "for that instant my experience had been like a dream; words that would ordinarily have moved me as it had moved the crowd, to shouts and tears, had been far away, and I knew what it was to be apart from the emotions that all men shared." Although Lacy comes to idolize Posey, the latter's growing support for the Confederacy encouraged secessionist sentiment, which Lacy realizes would bring the destructive chaos of civil war to Virginia. Lacy's feelings are reminiscent of Tate's own struggle with the meaning and consequences of two conflicting sets of southern mores—that of the Old Dominion and that of the rest of the South. The task of reconciling the two became easier as Tate began to recognize, through his deconstruction of his mother's family tales, the weaknesses not only of southerners like Posey from outside Virginia but of Virginians as well.²⁸

As a result of Tate's newfound perspective, presumptions about the nobility of Virginia vanished in *The Fathers*. Although the Vanderbilt Agrarians praised small farmers for their virtue, Tate no longer saw much to admire in those who tilled Virginia or southern soil. Lacy ridicules the yeomanry

represented by Mr. Higgins, the Buchan family's overseer. Lacy describes him as "a hatchet-faced, impassive young man . . . of the small-farming class for generations." Higgins never stands upright as a gentleman. Instead, like an evolutionary throwback, he always rests "on his heels (he never stood up, he only walked or squatted)." The race-based social system also received criticism. Virginians' complicity in maintaining slavery shamed Lacy, who has difficulty even looking at the slave quarters. Furthermore, ambiguity clouded classifications such as black and white or honorable and disreputable. Yellow Jim, one of the family's slaves, is "a gentleman in every instinct." Yet, Lacy cannot determine if this is because of or in spite of the mulatto's white blood. As for his father and mother, Lacy remembers them as framed silhouettes cut by a handicapped wanderer. The black paper cut-outs glued to white paper hint at the possibility of black blood within the white family.²⁹

As the novel develops, Lacy matures in a way reflective of Tate's own growing dissatisfaction with his over-glorified heritage. When Lacy meets a distant relative working on the family lineage, Lacy shows disinterest. The character informs Lacy that he is descended from such notable families and men as the Vyvyans of Shropshire, the Plantagenets, Philip the Third of France, Edward the Confessor, and George Washington's grandfather. Leaning forward, the man boasts, "I thought that this information would give you greater relish in our society." Lacy, however, silently crosses to the door, bidding good night with a disinterested air. Later in the novel, Lacy even expresses disgust with the Old Dominion. Traveling down the road the day after the state has seceded, Lacy thinks Virginia "an old country, and too many people have lived in it, and raised too much tobacco and corn, and too many men and women, young and old, have died in it, and taken with them into the rusty earth their gallantry or their melancholy, their pride or their simplicity, after their humors or their condition of life." Lacy believes that "too many people have loved the ground in which after a while they must all come to lie." He has abandoned the exhausted Virginia myth of aristocratic grandeur.³⁰

Like Lacy, Tate came to recognize the emptiness of the myths his mother had presented as truths. Finally demythologizing the Old Dominion in *The Fathers*, Tate freed himself from the burden of defending Virginia. In his writing, he turned away from myth to explore his memory. Autobiographical

elements appear more frequently after 1938. In “The Maimed Man,” “The Swimmers,” and “The Buried Lake,” written as a trilogy in the early 1950s, Tate recalls a lynching during his childhood in Kentucky. His later poems move away from the references made to Aeneas, Troy, and the Lacedemonians in his earlier works—Tate had used these classical symbols in discussing what he saw as the tragic collapse of the antebellum South’s agrarian society. Instead, he adopted a simpler, more personal style, exhibited in “Ode to Our Young Pro-consuls of the Air,” “Winter Mask,” “Seasons of the Soul,” and “Farewell Rehearsed.” His interest in the Agrarian cause waned. Instead, Tate turned increasingly toward literary criticism. Freed from maintaining his identity as a Virginian, Tate concentrated on defining the role of the writer. His career path eventually led him to a long-held academic job at, revealingly, the University of Minnesota.³¹

Examining the changes in Tate’s attitude toward Virginia reveals the personal turmoil of a southerner struggling to find an identity. Nearing his death in 1979, Tate declared in *Memoirs and Opinions*: “I have never felt like a Virginian—whatever it is to feel like a Virginian—and it was a relief, accompanied by a fleeting sense of bi-location, to learn that I had been born in Kentucky.” Tate likely took some license with his epiphany story because he probably knew of his Kentucky birth early in his life. Nevertheless, he was unable to find comfort in being a Kentuckian until he came to terms with the mythic nobility of his Virginia forefathers. Tate slowly shrugged off the burden of living up to the standards embodied in his mother’s god-like Virginians. He lost his sense of divine nobility but gained an acceptance of his human flaws. The sirens of Virginia stopped calling him. Allen Tate no longer yearned to journey East where life began.³²



NOTES

The author would like to thank the readers and staff at the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* for their comments and Paul Conkin of Vanderbilt University for his support in transforming a graduate seminar paper into a polished article. The poem that begins this essay, “Emblems,” can be found in Allen Tate, *Collected Poems: 1919–1976* (New York, 1977), pp. 36–37.

1. Tate addressed his identity crisis in *Memoirs and Opinions, 1926–1974* (Chicago, 1975), pp. 3–23.
2. Many scholars have recognized that Tate suffered from an identity crisis. Nevertheless, the articles and books written about him primarily focus on his conflict with modernity, his social agenda with the Vanderbilt Agrarians, or his admiration of Catholicism. For example, Michael O'Brien in *The Idea of the American South* states that Tate's inner turmoil stemmed from being "between two cultures: he was provincial and metropolitan. This was to have echoes in his conception of the South" (p. 136). Daniel Singal argues in *The War Within* that the contradiction between the past and the modern caused Tate to cling "to his vision of the Old South as a unified, stable, and civilized society struggling against a turbulent, individualistic North" (p. 241). In *Allen Tate*, Thomas Underwood, although recognizing that Tate struggled to gain "control of his family history" and was "consumed by Southern history" early in his career, does not tease out the significance of state pride in Tate's texts, subsuming the friction under the blanket category of "Southern" (p. 5). Although these scholars and others occasionally note that Tate was particularly fixated with Virginia, writers on Tate have devoted little analysis to the regional tensions within Tate's descriptions of the South. Louis Rubin's *The Wary Fugitives* is an important exception. Rubin recognizes the significance of Tate's aristocratic Virginia lineage to his identity as a southerner. Nevertheless, Rubin mostly refrains from analyzing how Virginia influenced Tate's writings. Oddly, Rubin quickly dismisses Tate's biographical works, declaring that "neither of these two works should be considered as much more than incidental to Tate's literary career" and that the books were written with a "minimum of self-scrutiny" (pp. 98, 297). He also looks at the temporal rather than spatial aspects of "Ode to the Confederate Dead" and repeatedly addresses Tate's work in terms of an undifferentiated "Old South." By taking cues from the extensive scholarship on Tate, however, this essay offers a detailed examination of Tate's largely overlooked treatment of Virginia during his early career to illuminate not only issues such as his family, his art, and his "South" but also the development of Tate's own sense of self. For scholarship on Tate consulted for this article, see Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., "Tate, Lytle, and the New Criticism," *Southern Review* 32 (1996): 172–82; C. Barry Chabot, "Allen Tate and the Limits of Tradition," *Southern Quarterly* 26 (hereafter cited as SQ) (1988): 50–51, 55–56; Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville, 1988), pp. 57–126; Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (New York, 1993), pp. 3–10, 29–66; Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge, 1997), pp. 89–152; Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1926–41* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 136–61; Michael O'Brien, *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Athens, Ga., 1993), pp. 146–56; Thomas H. Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton, 2000), pp. 3–29, 89–305; Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge, 1978), pp. 64–76, 88–116, 294–326; Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1982), pp. 202, 211–31; and James Radcliffe Squires, *Allen Tate: A Literary Biography* (New York, 1971), pp. 13–148.
3. Underwood, *Allen Tate*, pp. 6–20; Rubin, *Wary Fugitives*, pp. 65–69.
4. Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, pp. 42–56; Underwood, *Allen Tate*, pp. 52–57, 87, 89–98, 101–9; Rubin, *Wary Fugitives*, p. 92.
5. Allen Tate, "Last Days of the Charming Lady," *The Nation*, 28 Oct. 1925, p. 486.
6. Donald Davidson to Allen Tate (hereafter cited as AT), 15 Feb. 1927, in John Tyree Fain and

Thomas Daniel Young, eds., *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* (Athens, Ga., 1974), p. 186 (emphasis in original). For Tate's continuous revisions of the poem from the late 1920s through the late 1930s, see Lawrence Kingsley, "The Texts of Allen Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,'" *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 71 (1977): 171–89.

7. Allen Tate, *Collected Poems: 1919–1976* (New York, 1977), pp. 20–23.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

9. Allen Tate, *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928; Nashville, 1995), pp. 200, 203; Michael Kreyling, *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative* (Baton Rouge, 1987), p. 113.

10. Tate, *Stonewall Jackson*, pp. 4–5, 12, 16–17.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 68, 125, 128.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 59.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 20, 48.

14. AT to Donald Davidson, 26 Feb. 1928, in Fain and Young, eds., *Literary Correspondence*, p. 207.

15. Allen Tate, *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (New York, 1929), pp. 15, 51; Kreyling, *Figures*, pp. 111–24.

16. Tate, *Jefferson Davis*, p. 33.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 44, 55–56.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 87, 90, 243–44.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6, 132.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.

21. Tate, *Stonewall Jackson*, p. 171.

22. AT to Donald Davidson, 18 Feb. 1929, in Fain and Young, eds., *Literary Correspondence*, p. 224; Rubin, *Wary Fugitives*, p. 65; Underwood, *Allen Tate*, pp. 27, 186–87. For further insight into Tate's attraction to Catholicism and concerns with religion, see Glenn Cannon Arbery, "Dante in Bardstown: Allen Tate's Guide to Southern Exile," *Thought* 65 (1990): 97–98; Chabot, "Allen Tate and the Limits of Tradition," pp. 56–58; Thomas F. Haddox, "Contextualizing Flannery O'Connor: Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and the Catholic Turn in Southern Literature," *SQ* 38 (1999): 173–78; Singal, *War Within*, pp. 245–49; and Peter A. Huff, *Allen Tate and the Catholic Revival: Trace of the Fugitive Gods* (New York, 1996), pp. 9–11, 43–49, 64–70.

23. For insight into the Agrarians, see Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, pp. 89–126; and Rubin, *Wary Fugitives*, pp. 251–56.

24. Allen Tate, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by Twelve Southerners (1930; New York, 1962), p. 167.

25. AT to John Peale Bishop, 11 Feb. 1932, in Thomas Daniel Young and John J. Hindle, eds., *The Republic of Letters in America: The Correspondence of John Peale Bishop and Allen Tate* (Lexington, Ky., 1981), p. 52; AT to Andrew Lytle, 16 July 1931, in Thomas Daniel Young and Elizabeth Sarcone, eds., *The Lytle-Tate Letters: The Correspondence of Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate* (Jackson, Miss., 1987), p. 46; Kreyling, *Figures*, pp. 115–24; Underwood, *Allen Tate*, p. 189.

26. AT to John Peale Bishop, 30 Oct. 1933, in Young and Hindle, eds., *Republic of Letters*, p. 84.
27. Underwood, *Allen Tate*, pp. 265–69.
28. Allen Tate, *The Fathers* (1938; Baton Rouge, 1996), pp. 129, 162–63. The revised version of Tate's novel is used because it reflects his continued engagement with his Virginia identity even after he had abandoned his fixation with the state. For literary scholarship on *The Fathers*, see Chabot, "Allen Tate and the Limits of Tradition," pp. 51, 58–65; Bruce Pirie, "The Grammar of the Abyss: A Reading of *The Fathers*," *The Southern Literary Journal* (hereafter cited as *SLJ*) 16 (1984): 81–92; John Strawn, "Lacy Buchan as the Voice of Allen Tate's Modernist Aesthetic in *The Fathers*," *SLJ* 26 (1993): 65–67, 76; and Singal, *War Within*, pp. 254–60.
29. Tate, *The Fathers*, pp. 12, 22, 205.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 235, 266.
31. For a thoughtful essay on Tate's autobiographical tendencies after publishing *The Fathers*, see Jeffrey J. Folks, "'The Archaeologist of Memory': Autobiographical Recollection in Tate's 'Maimed Man' Trilogy," *SLJ* 27 (1994): 51, 55–60. For Tate's poems, see Tate, *Collected Poems*. Of particular interest are: "The Maimed Man Trilogy" (1952–53), pp. 128–40; "Aeneas at Washington" (1933), pp. 68–69; "To the Lacedemonians" (1932/1936), pp. 85–88; "Ode to Our Young Proconsuls of the Air" (1943), pp. 107–10; "Winter Mask" (1942), pp. 111–13; "Seasons of the Soul" (1944), pp. 114–22; and "Farewell Rehearsed" (1976), p. 142.
32. Tate, *Memoirs*, p. 6.

